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FILE TITLE: African-American Airmen in World War II

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During World War II, the Army Air Corps wasted valuable, men, material, time and resources because of the discrimination displayed towards Army Air Corps black enlisted Army troops. This paper will show that because of discrimination and a belief that black troops were inferior that training was delayed, and resources squandered. In addition, I will show that the Army Air Corps could have contributed to the shortening of the war if it would have used the vast pool of resources available from black airman.

In 1942 orders and plans were drawn up to activate 23 black Aviation Squadrons composed of 250 men each and 9 black Air Base Defense units composed of 419 men each along with an additional 1449 black troops to be used in various capacities (1). But confusion reigned among the different commands. In early 1942, Lieutenant General Arnold had put out a communication that stated, "Approximately 10.6 percent of all Air Corps personnel will be Negroes. This figure reflects the ratio of Negro to white population in the United States." (2). At that time the Army Air Corps was composed of approximately 55,000 personnel. As you can see the plan for 10,970 black troops would have been almost 20 percent of the total Air Corps force. Now commanders didn't know what to do. Various letters and message traffic were sent back and forth at this point to argue the point. No one seems to take into account that the Air Corps was growing in strength and a 20 percent ratio of blacks to whites would soon drop off rapidly if the original figure of 10,970 blacks were to be maintained. Air Corps training command only seemed concerned that these troops were Negroes and they would soon have more assigned than they had anticipated. The Chief of Staff, of Gulf Coast Air Corps Training Center, Colonel H. W. Holden even sent a

letter to the commanding general of Army Air Force Flying Training Command (AFFTC) stating his concerns. In his letter, he asks for information if the ratio of colored troops had been increased or if his training center was to be assigned a number of colored troops in excess of the normal ration (3). His concern was not whether he had the resources or room to train these troops but that his ratio of black airman was being exceeded.

Finally by 14 January 1943, Headquarters Army Air Forces in Washington D. C., ordered the AFFTC to send colored enlisted men to 30 Aviation Squadrons to bases spread out over the continental United States (4). The maximum number to be sent to any of these bases was only 225 men. To the base, each of the base commanders upon notification of the immanent arrival of black enlisted airman wrote back to headquarters AAF requesting funds to build new barracks and facilities. Their position was black troops needed to be segregated and should not be placed close to white troops. The commander of the Miami Beach Air Station, Brigadier General H. Wooten, went so far as to write, "Air Force units stationed in Miami Beach prior to May 15, 1942 were all white and are quartered in hotels leased by the government for this purpose. These hotels were built and operated as luxury hotels and the occupancy of any of these hotels by colored troops would probably ruin their value as tourist hotels in the future." (5). Finally, it took a direct order from Lt General Arnold to get these troops shipped. In it he states, "There has been opposition to the stationing of colored troops at practically all Air Force stations. The Air Corps has been directed to absorb its quota of colored personnel and therefore all Air Force stations will be required to absorb their quota of colored troops." (6). By now an entire year of the war had passed and these original 10,970 black enlisted had not even left the Gulf Coast training center to form the first 30 Aviation Squadrons much less get ready for combat.

After General Arnold finally forced station commanders to accept black enlisted troops, commanders fell back to the issue of training black troops. In a letter dated August 20, 1942, the commanding general of Headquarters, AAFFC at Knollwood Field, North Carolina wrote to General Arnold about training colored students. In his letter he talks of an expected elimination rate of 10 percent of each class of students. At first glance this would appear to be an acceptable washout rate, especially considering the time in question. But here again the specter of racism raises its ugly head. In addition to expressing his views about the elimination rate of black students the general expresses, "It is imperative that this total of 2138 men have a minimum general classification test score of 100, and a minimum mechanical aptitude test score of 100. This requirement is made necessary because of the fact that technical students, to be eligible for training, must meet these minimum requirements to satisfactorily complete prescribed courses. (7). One can only wonder if these men had been white what the minimum scores would have had to be. Throughout the various training command centers there existed an attitude that black units were inferior. Field commanders did not want to establish technical units to train black airman. In a telephone conversation between a Captain Hand and a Lt. Hill about Negro Classification at Jefferson Barracks, dated October 29, 1942, Lt Hill discusses the fate of 6000 black troops, over half of the original 10970 that were brought into the Army Air Corps. Lt. Hill-"They are not for technical schools. They are special services schools, SOS, Engineers, QM(Quarter Master), or those various schools. I Can give you that here now, just what goes where.--To Chemical warfare. 1600; Engineers, 4,800; (those are the totals coming in, you see), of the Engineers there will be 2,183 colored and 56 colored for Chemical Warfare, and 264 for Ordnance; QM 1533; Signal. 614; Medical 611; none in Finance and none in Military Police. We Don't know that standards

they have set up for those boys for Arms and Services Schools, we well give it to you as soon as we get it.”(8). After reading this transcript of their telephone message it becomes apparent field commanders were interpreting their orders to form black combat units as they saw fit. In his letter to the Commanding General of the Southcoast Air Forces Training Center, Brigadier General Kraus expresses his concerns over black units. He writes, “Colored troops expect strong and capable leadership and are quick to sense its absence. Their resentment of poor leadership invariably leads to serious results.” (9). Again one can only wonder what type of leadership white troops needed or desired. All these tactics by various field commanders to avoid the incorporating black airman into their commands lead to delays in forming, training and assigning colored units who would have been invaluable combat resources.

At the same time field commanders were fighting to keep black troops out of their commands and technical schools, orders were sent out to establish these same schools. On March 20, 1942, the commanding general of the Air Force Technical training command was ordered to establish facilities to train Negro technicians. He was instructed to have facilities ready to start classes by April 15 of the same year. In his orders it was stated, “It is imperative that this instruction be in effect that students are present and the classes are ready to start not later than April 15, 1942”(10). At this point in time he was instructed to begin the training of 377 technicians and to be prepared to expand his facilities since 10.6 percent of the prospective recruits for the Air Corps would eventually be of the colored race(11). Unfortunately as you can see most of the troops available were either being sent to services squadrons or had not even been shipped from processing centers by this time. The lack of qualified blacks in technical fields such as Airplane Mechanics and metal

workers had a profound effect on forming the first all black combat group the 332nd Fighter Group at Tuskegee, Alabama. In a letter to General Arnold on August 3 1942, it was stated "Based upon the present flow of colored pilots and technical personnel, it does not appear that conditions necessary for the movement of this group will not met before the fall of 1943.

As you can see, the Army Air Corps wasted valuable men material, time, and resources by delaying the integration of black enlisted troops into its ranks. From the very beginning of World War II, the subtle tactics of field commanders such as worrying about ratios verses training delayed the formation of the first 30 Aviation Squadrons. These units could have been utilized in combat environments instead of sitting at depots waiting to be shipped for further training in their specialties. After being forced to accept black trainees into their commands by Army Air Corps, Chief of Staff, General Arnold, field commanders felt the need to separate black enlisted and spent time worrying about their leadership needs verses getting on with their training. Millions of dollars ere wasted building separate facilities for blacks which could have been spent much better procuring war material. Finally for the one all black unit, the 332 Fighter Group which did make it into combat, it took almost 2 years from the beginning of the war to its shipment into the European theater. Could have the utilization of the vast pool of black enlisted airman contributed to the shortening of the war if they had been integrated into the Air Corps smartly from the beginning. I think the answer is yes!

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